

Why are ticks so bad this year?

BY DAN HEBERT DUXBURY ANIMAL HOSPITAL

The clinic has been flooded with calls the last several weeks from people, many in tears, regarding the number of ticks coming into their homes on their pets, kids, and selves. "Why are they so bad this year? Is the tick medicine not working?" This is possible in the case of your pet, but obviously doesn't explain the increased number on the people in your household (unless you are seeing a vet moonlighting as a physician...). There are actually many factors involved and the events leading up to Spring 2015 have been a perfect storm for a tick nightmare.

Oak Boom & Bust

You may have noticed as you walk in the woods that some years you are dodging acorns as if they were raindrops, while others have virtually none falling. These are called boom and bust years. Every two to five years, oak trees will have a dramatic explosion of acorn production based on environmental factors. For the year following this, seed animals like mice will have an over-abundance of food and will experience a similar population explosion. While deer may be the main host for ticks in most peoples' minds, the immature ticks, or nymphs, actually prey on rodents even more. So, 12 months after a boom year, tick populations will increase significantly. The last reported boom year was in the fall of 2013. So, we entered this winter with MANY more ticks than prior years.

Ticks don't die in winter

It is a very common misconception that ticks die off over the winter. The reality is that they will find a nice pile of leaves and hibernate until the temperature reaches the magic number of 37 degrees. At that moment, they will wake right up, shimmy up the nearest bush, and whip their arms for the next animal to walk by and grab hold. Even in February, our coldest month, the temperature in Duxbury exceeds 37 degrees seven to 10 days out of the month. The feeding this allows will cause a decent decrease in the active tick population over the winter, so long as there isn't 38 inches of snow on the ground. During a winter like this last one, those ticks stayed buried and hibernating. Now they are out in full force like a pack of Kodiak bears coming out of their caves.

Preventative

Many of the topical preventives we have been using for the last 20 years are also now being used as lawn and garden treatments for pests. As a result, insects are building up a tolerance to them before they get to our pets. Frontline is the most dramatic example of this. This was an amazing product for a very long time, but because Fipronil (the active ingredient) is now used as a pesticide, it has lost much of its effectiveness and most vets are no longer recommending it.

What can you do?

Chemical Free changes for the yard

Ticks hate crossing gravel and mulch. So, adding a “moat” around your yard with one of these items will help deter them from your yard. Inside the moat, keep the lawn mowed regularly to prevent the shaded areas where tick like to live and the long plants that they will climb to attach to us and pets. Preventing shade around wood piles will also dry the wood out and make it less inviting for ticks to live and breed. Plants like rosemary, garlic, citronella, and rose geranium have been shown to repel ticks. Planting these or spraying oils from the plants may help. Lastly, keep those deer out of your yard. If fences aren’t possible, add deer repellants and remove easy food sources like fruit trees and bird feeders. Some people also swear by hanging Irish Spring soap.

Chemical repellants

It goes without saying that these should be used with care. On your person, DEETbased repellents work best, but can damage clothes and rubber items like shows. For your yard, there are many commercial sprays and granules available, as well as local pest experts that can discuss pet/child-safe options. If you do get your own stuff, avoid fipronil-based products as, like the plain Frontline, they may not work well.

Preventive for your pet

No one likes the idea of putting things on or in our pets that are designed to kill insects. That said, the diseases they get are far worse than the side effects of these products. Even with effective vaccination against Lyme disease, we are still seeing diseases like Bartonella, Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever, and Anaplasmosis. Preventing ticks is our only defense against these. There are currently three options: Oral chews: These seem to be the most effective as they don’t wash off and will likely never be used as lawn sprays. We currently recommend the monthly Nexgard. Topicals: the most common since the late 90’s, these are losing effectiveness. For dogs, we currently recommend Frontline TriTak which is fipronil potentiated with cyphenothrin. Cats are more difficult due to possible toxicities, but we recommend Revolution for them.

Collars: Some of these are now labeled for eight-month prevention, though they are still pretty new and we have yet to see if this claim will hold true in the field. We still like the monthly preventatives for this reason.